

District 2 Parents In Support of Equity and Integration in Specialized High School Admissions

5 December 2018

To the Community Education Council of District 2,

As parents of public schoolchildren in District 2, we are writing to disagree sharply with the drafted resolution, “In Support of Comprehensive Community Input to any and all Proposed Changes to Specialized High School Admissions,” (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fd8X9ouQ2iLey7IMQIkE5glrIGNSwOhl/view>) and to object to the highly one-sided representation of District 2’s position on Mayor De Blasio’s proposal for the SHSAT in evidence at the CEC meeting on December 3rd, 2018.

Any conversation about the SHSAT and New York City’s Specialized High Schools must begin by recognizing (as the CEC’s resolution notably does not recognize) that New York has some of the most racially segregated public schools in the United States. We don’t want to overburden this letter with statistics widely available elsewhere, but here is one: Black students make up roughly 26% of NYC public school students, and 1% of students in Specialized High Schools.

Racial segregation of public schools does not happen by accident. In the case of New York City, a number of policies and structures create the extreme racial imbalances present in the city’s Specialized High Schools. Most notably, over the past three decades, the NYC DOE has embraced a philosophy of school choice, which has produced increasing stratification of all kinds (racial, geographic, economic) among public school students. According to the New School’s Center for New York City Affairs (<https://www.centernyc.org/promising-outcomes-limited-potential>): “Nearly 40 percent of New York City’s public kindergarten students attend schools other than their zoned neighborhood schools. Families who leave their neighborhood schools are more likely to be higher-income and English-proficient than the ones who stay [....] The intention, at least in theory, is to let families find the best fit for their children and to allow kids to opt out of poorly performing neighborhood schools. But the result is a system of accreting stratification, in which students who attend the poorest-performing elementary schools tend to be assigned to the lowest-demand (and lowest-performing) middle and high schools.”

The result of this situation, in 2018, is that the New York City public schools are effectively an “apartheid system.” (This may sound like an extreme term but actually it’s a technical one : researchers use the term “apartheid school” to describe any urban school with 99% students of one race or ethnicity. About one-third of NYC DOE schools fall into this category) (<https://www.propublica.org/article/segregation-now-the-resegregation-of-americas-schools#intro> and <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/9/25/56-years-after-littlerockusschoolssegreatedbyraceandclass.html>). Most District 2 parents and children inhabit the more privileged system: excellent schools with additional resources provided by single-school PTAs, some of which have annual budgets exceeding \$1 million; extensive networks of tutors, supplementary academic programs, and test-preparation programs, with a focus on admissions and tests from an early age; a widely shared (though not publicly available) understanding about how “the system” works, along with informal contacts and social networks that provide additional influence and assistance.

The vast majority of New York public school parents and children inhabit the less privileged system, in which there are many fewer choices—or good choices—and a much smaller pool of resources. Most notably, many studies (<https://hechingerreport.org/how-one-test-kept-new-york-city-high-schools-segregated/>) and reports (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/17/nyregion/public-schools-screening-admission.html>) have concluded that parents and students who don’t attend high performing schools also don’t have access to, or simply can’t afford, the crucial early preparation, tutoring, and informational networking that ensures good scores on

the SHSAT or admission to one of the other highly selective and privileged high schools. This is not simply a matter, as the CEC resolution states, of “the lack of adequate support from the DOE to the effective education of Black and Latino students in the K-8 system.” (Although that is certainly the case). In a system where some students are prepared to perform well on the SHSAT from an early age, and other students aren’t even aware the test exists until well into middle school, a test that appears “fair” and “meritocratic” from the outside in practice simply reinforces a system in which a student’s racial background, far more than their individual abilities, often determines their level of academic success. While addressing the inadequacies of the SHSAT as an admissions metric is not enough to repair this unjust system, it is an urgent first step.

As parents in one of New York City’s most privileged (and racially segregated) public school districts, we are aware that many of our peers are satisfied with a public school system that provides their own children with a high-quality, taxpayer-funded education. We believe this attitude is not only complacent but actively opposed to the larger movement toward a more racially equitable and just society. While the CEC’s resolution raises some important questions (for example, about how the loss of honors programs contributed to a fall in SHS diversity in the 1990s), for the most part it draws on a series of arguments that conservatives have long used against efforts to improve racial justice and diversity in school admissions—for example, the contention that Black and Latinx students simply won’t be able to “perform” at the Specialized High Schools if they didn’t score within the few top percentage points of the SHSAT. The idea that a single test can be a predictor of student academic and career success has been disproven by decades of educational research; of all the large public school systems in the US, New York is the only one that still relies on a one-test model.

We, as parents of children in District 2 schools, ask that the CEC acknowledge the diversity of opinion within the district about Mayor de Blasio’s proposal and the future of the SHSAT. The push to reform the admissions process for Specialized High Schools is an opportunity for us to participate in an ongoing conversation about equity and justice in New York City schools more broadly, and to advocate for the education of ALL New York City students.

Sincerely,

Anne Hager (PS 3)
Sonya Posmentier (PS 3)
Jess Row (PS 3)
Paula Chakravartty (PS3)
Ilaria Cutolo (PS3)
Andrew Borges (PS3)
Gianpaolo Baiocchi (PS3)
Dara Regaignon (MS104)
Andrew Ross (Lab School)
Martha Rosas (my daughter went to Salk, now in HS)
Kim Phillips-Fein (PS 3)
John Waters (PS3)
Andrew Needham (MS 297)
Amy Egan (BK Tech)
Jean Railla (LMC)
Sanjiv Rao (Salk and PS 212)
Andrea Franks (PS 3)
Marita Sturken (75 Morton)
Fred Moten (Institute for Collaborative Education)
Laura Harris (Institute for Collaborative Education)
Rachel Schwartz (child at PS 11)
Greg Vargo (PS 3)
Mike Farrah (PS11Willim T Harris and MS104 Simon Baruch)
April Hampton (PS11 Willam T Harris)

Alexis Audette (Salk and PS 212)
Pacharee Sudhinaraset, (child is zoned for and might attend PS 3)
Erin Murphy (PS 3)
Jeremy Tinker (PS 3)
Jasmine Ma (PS3)
Stephen Duncombe (LMC)
Camillia Matuk (P.S. 3 Charrette School)
Rebecca Garte (Ella Baker School)
Brenna Cothran (PS3)
Michael Kieffer (child will attend PS 3)
James White (PS3)
JJ Venne (PS3)
Melissa Murray (PS 3)
Brian Kirby (PS3)
Vivian Lee (PS 77)
Gigliana Melzi (PS3)
Herman Morales (D2 M260 Clinton)
Jennifer Milligan
Maedhbh Mc Cullagh (PS3)
Vivian Selbo (PS3 & Hunter)
Camryn Ramgoolie (PS3, District 2)
S. Heijin Lee (PS3)
Lisa Davidson (PS3)
Kevin Berry (M260 Clinton)
David Inniss, (Salk School of science)
Kaena Clark (MS167 and PS151)
Allison Gutstein (P.S 151 and Salk School of Science)
Scott Bonnell (MS167 & PS151)
Kate Warren former (PS3 parent/ICE parent)
Gregory Regaignon (MS104)
Melissa Schwartzberg (PS 3)
Renee Rodriguez (PS 3)
Patrick Deer (PS 3)
Akeela Azcuy (zoned for PS 3)
Clare Aronow (PS 3)
Gavin Lodge (PS3)
Jan Plass (PS3, now Salk)
Erin Godfrey (PS 3)
Yuriko Tada (Salk)
Adelia Saunders (PS3)
Thuy Linh Tu (Lab)
Ada Ferrer (former PS 41, Clinton, 289, now Millennium HS)
Anna McCarthy (PS3)
Bill Vourvoulis (PS3)
Tessa Zilla (PS3)
Fabienne Doucet (zoned for PS 3)
Meeghan Sinclair (Simon Baruch & PS3)
Rose Arce (PS41, Clinton)
Alicia Salzer (Salk and PS3)
Paisley Gregg (MS 260 Clinton)
Gena Gerbier (former PS3, 75Morton)
Laura Swain (75 Morton)
Tania Vargas (75 Morton)